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RACHEL ROBINSON AND JOHN F. KERRY

## A pioneer in civil rights

**The Boston Globe**

By Rachel Robinson and John F. Kerry | March 2, 2005

TODAY Washington, D.C., will temporarily become capital of Red Sox Nation. The Sox will be honored at the White House for their World Series victory, and one of the greatest players in the game's history -- Jackie Robinson -- will be honored for his contributions to our nation on and off the field.

But Robinson, as great as he was, was denied the opportunity to play for the Red Sox. We all know the emotional story of his tryout: refused the chance to join the Red Sox because of the color of his skin. Racism was a stain on our national pastime, and it wasn't until Robinson broke baseball's color line with the Brooklyn Dodgers that the work of racial healing could begin.

Robinson's legacy lives on, and his contributions to history go beyond the ballfield. His fight for racial equality was so profound that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called him "a legend and a symbol in his own time" who "challenged the dark skies of intolerance and frustration."

Before playing professional baseball, Robinson joined the US Army in 1942 and rose to the rank of second lieutenant. Although the Army was segregated, Robinson, with the assistance of friend and fellow service member Joe Lewis, the champion boxer, succeeded in gaining admittance to Officer Candidate School.

In July 1944, Robinson was ordered to sit in the back of a bus traveling through Texas. He refused and was court-martialed. Robinson fought the charge and was finally exonerated when the order was ruled a violation of Army regulations.

After playing one year with the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League baseball team, and one year with the minor league Montreal Royals, Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 to become the first African-American to play in Major League Baseball. He was immediately confronted with bigotry. Dodgers president Branch Rickey wrote that Robinson "was the target of racial epithets and flying cleats, of hate letters and death threats, of pitchers throwing at his head and legs, and catchers spitting on his shoes."

For some Americans it may be hard to understand the significance of Robinson playing in the big leagues. But Robinson broke that color barrier before our military was desegregated, before the civil rights marches in the South, before some of our major universities admitted African-Americans, and before the historic ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. Robinson not only persevered, he was great. He went on to win rookie of the year, a most valuable player award, six pennants, a World Series, and induction into the Hall of Fame in 1962. He was a leader within the NAACP, a co-founder of the FreedomNational Bank in Harlem, founder of the Jackie Robinson Construction Co. to build low-income housing, and an active member of church groups and community organizations.

Through the courage of his actions, Robinson engaged Americans in a constructive conversation about race long before the momentous events of the 1960s. He was a true pioneer. His life is a testament to how the struggle for equality has many fronts in America. It is carried on in Congress, in statehouses, on campuses, at the office, on the factory floor, across our kitchen tables, and even on

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the ballfield. The work continues today: to honor hard work and the dream of a better life, to give every child the best possible start in life, to end the worry of all the mothers and fathers who fear that their children may become casualties of unsafe streets, and to stop the hollowing-out of American cities.

Robinson once said: "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." Robinson not only impacted lives, he impacted the very spirit of our country. He is more than a sports hero -- he is an American hero.

For his contribution to civil rights in America, Congress will honor Jackie Robinson with the Congressional Gold Medal today. We hope all Americans will take a moment to appreciate him, recognizing that just as his memory endures, the work of civil rights and equal opportunity is far from over.

*Rachel Robinson is the widow of Jackie Robinson. John F. Kerry is the Senate sponsor of the bill awarding Jackie Robinson the Congressional Gold Medal.*

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